

Portland Harbor Superfund Site – Local Stories

Transcript: Jessica Rojas, Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods

...at the Bureau of Environmental Services, a lot for a lot of the work that they did, and many other leaders and all the Columbia River tribes, just in general, for investing in this opportunity for me to have on the ground experience and an exposure to environmental education, environmental restoration. So I worked on sites like Whitaker Ponds—what would become Whitaker ponds—or Cathedral Park, the Bureau of Environmental Service Testing Lab. We'd go to all these different sites in the Columbia Slough Kelly Point Park.

(Dog barks in the background) Hey! Sorry, sorry about that.

All the way to other tribes. We got to work with the and hear from other tribes how they're managing their resources from Siletz, how they had a natural fish hatchery to Warm Springs and Umatilla, how they manage their fisheries. So it was a really amazing experience, to be in the room with agencies, and they're committed to working with young people who have barriers to employment. And I really want to say that, because if it hadn't been for that focus, people like myself would probably never been in the room.

And I'll never forget the first time I learned the word watershed, it was from Jennifer Devlin at the Bureau of Environmental Services, and she was teaching us, and she goes, "Does anybody know the word watershed," and my friend and I stopped and looked at each other and she goes, "oh man, I think we're in the wrong room."

But [*unintelligible*], she said, "don't worry, it's alright if you don't know what I'm talking about because I promise you, at the end of this year you will." And I'll never forget that because you know, we're being introduced to all these terms. We didn't understand that, I never learned any of that in school, but we knew that salmon was important. Like culturally—culturally and environmentally, but we just didn't understand how it translated in science, and so I owe a lot to Salmon Core for giving me that exposure.

But one way that I want to talk about how this relates to the sampling piece and how we can bring more people in. We'd always do these water quality sampling with the with the kids in Portland Public Schools, and I got to work with all kinds of schools, it was amazing. And some sites would have a lot of macroinvertebrates, some sites didn't have any, and I remember that actually in the stretch of the Willamette River, we did not find anything, it felt like the river was dead and I want to say was near Willamette Cove. And this—mind you, this was in the late 90s so, it, we may have had access to that site or may not. I'm not really sure.

But we would always tell the kids, or at least the Bureau of Environmental Services, who we partnered with at the time, to keep all their records, you know, write all their information down because they said they kept this information for their records, and I didn't think it was true. I just thought it was something we told kids.

And then at the end of the year we got to take a group of kids on a jet boat tour of the Willamette River and we went up Johnson Creek. And I have never been over there and that's when I learned, like, what kind of species of fish were in the river and I got to see a stretch of the river that was natural and I didn't

know that existed. 'Cause I used to hang out—I'm from Burnside Skate Park, and I'm from downtown, from the waterfront from the slab, and that's my reference to the Willamette River. Except for Sauvie Island.

But when you go up Johnson Creek to go up on a boat, it was really, like, amazing to see what the river could really be, and not only that, but the reason why we had those kids on that boat. Their samples, their data, actually was used to identify a polluter. And so, somehow that polluter was being held accountable, and the treat, you know, to that classroom of kids whose data helped discover that polluter—we were taking them up on the river.

And it was just so powerful for so many of us who like—it's so urban, you know, like we, we never get those opportunities. And so, fast forward, you know, I'm in college, and I graduate, and you come to meetings like this, and you think about, what is your skin in the game? Especially when you're in a room full of professionals and people who have so much experience.

It's hard to talk about technical reasons, why or how to really influence the clean-up from a technical perspective, but what keeps me in this work is the fact that I had this opportunity, I had this exposure, and I believe that for more kids in the inner city, if they had that opportunity, exposure, it would be their frame of reference, it'd be their skin in the game, and then people could look to them as if they are they are the professionals. And I be talking like I'm talking right now, and you guys are all listening to me. So, just thank you for letting me share that.

And then one other little thing I want to say is that, my dad, he was on a volunteer crew to sandbag during the '96 floods. And so he's shared with me like a lot about what that that whole experience was like. And he was on a day laborer work crew that worked on Cathedral Park. And I didn't even know that until we did the [unintelligible] Festival when Donovan from the PHCC did the Willamette. And I came back, and I was telling my dad about it, and my dad was just telling me about his whole experience, about all the plants that he planted working on the arboretum area, in Cathedral Park, and it just made me realize, wow, I have more skin in the game than what I actually thought.

And I also grew up, you know, eating and harvesting vegetables from like Sauvie Island. Sometimes it takes us a while to think about, you know, those of us who don't have like environmental professional jobs, like exactly what our skin is in the game, and so thank you for listening, and I'd love to hear your stories.